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Conventions and Campaigns

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CONVENTIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

What I am about to say is not to be interpreted as reflecting in any way on the candidates of either major parties for the offices of President and Vice-President of the United States. For these men, I have only the highest respect.

My remarks are addressed to the system which we have employed to nominate candidates for the highest offices in the land. This system, as the Senate knows, has a history of about a century and a half. Participation as a delegate--or rather a half delegate--in the democratic convention at Los Angeles left me with the conviction that the system is seriously inadequate. The proceedings of the other party in Chicago, as telecast, served only to strengthen the conviction despite the promise of the Chairman of the Republican National Committee to stage a better show than the Los Angeles extravaganza.

I must say that the T/V networks did an outstanding job. They went to great lengths and put themselves to enormous exertion to produce good shows. They combed and recombined the delegates and the candidates in an effort to extract every conceivable bit of comedy, pathos, suspense, conflict, melodrama, yes, and even tragedy. Then under the direction of a new class of artists--we might describe them as Convention T/V impresarios--they wove these elements into veritable spectacles for the edification and entertainment of the public.

I suspect that the very excellence of the T/V coverage has led millions of Americans to question the entire nominating and electing procedure as it now operates. There are, first of all, the obvious questions. Such questions as, who selects the delegates? Why are some delegates worth only a

half-vote and others a whole vote? Why do some states split their votes and some cast them as a unit? When is a primary not a primary, in the sense of not binding its delegates? Who waves the men and women who wave the signs? Why are sons, if they are favorites, abandoned almost as soon as they are born? What have hoopla and hats pyramided on the heads of more extroverted delegates to do with sober deliberation on the merits of candidates?

Those are some of the obvious questions. There are others, less obvious, but no less important. What do conventions of this kind cost and where does the money come from? Even more, how is it that nominees come into the arena of deliberations with the bulk of the vote-totals cemented beyond the reach of deliberation and what goes into this cement? And, finally, Mr. President, what measure of influence do the people of the United States from whom all political authority presumably flows, exert on the selection of candidates?

I do not think it will take very many more T/V saturation-coverages to bring home to the citizens of the United States that the present system of selecting candidates for the highest offices of the land is grossly inadequate to the needs of responsible self-government in the 20th Century.

The truth of the matter is, I believe, that the convention-nominating system, in its present form, is an anachronism in American political life. It came into being at another time and in other circumstances to which it was undoubtedly better attuned. It has persisted, in large part, because of popular indifference and because, seemingly, it is easier to go along with things as they are rather than to make modifications or replacements in well-established institutions unless compelled by immense public pressure to do so.

I may be overly optimistic, but I would anticipate that in the case of the present nominating-system, the stark revelations of the T/V screens may induce the necessary popular pressure. It seems to me, at the very least, that popular revulsion at the sign-waving shenanigans and the assorted hoopla will compel the elimination of these contrivances as well as the "man who" seconding speeches, and, perhaps, even favorite sons. Changes such as these, however, would be largely in the nature of face-lifting. They might improve the "image" of the convention-system but they will not go to the heart of the problem. The problem, as I see it, is two-fold. First, it is to try to equalize the influence of every voter, who desires to participate, in the selection of candidates for the party of his choice. Second, it is to increase the opportunity for all potential and serious candidates for the Presidency and Vice Presidency to be equally considered.

In connection with the first problem, the corrective device which is usually suggested is the national primary. There are many difficulties involved in the use of this device. How, for example, do we keep the number of nominees for the nomination in each party within rational limits? Do we nominate by plurality or majority? How are democrats separated from republicans and minor parties and what of cross-over voting? Personally, I am persuaded that none of these difficulties is insurmountable. There is a vast wealth of experience on which to draw in the states employing primaries and in the electoral devices of foreign countries. I believe a fair and equitable and practicable national primary can be established if we are of a mind to do so.

Short of a national primary there are many improvements which could be made in the existing convention system, looking to the extension and equalization of popular control over the selection of candidates. It is

conceivable, for example, that the selection of state-delegations could be limited to two methods. One method might be the state primary conducted on the basis of uniform rules for all states and with the delegates so chosen, subject to the same rules regarding pledges and releases from pledges for particular candidates. A second method might be the state party convention but subject to uniform rules of conduct and pledge as among the several states.

I believe it is reasonably clear in the legal precedents that Congress has the constitutional right to legislate on the conditions of Presidential elections. It would seem that Congress has a similar right in regard to Presidential nominating systems from which the elections are inseparable. In any event, the possibility of bringing about desirable changes by Constitutional amendment is always open.

In regard to the second aspect of the problem, the need to increase the opportunity for all potential candidates to be equally considered, the basic question, to put it bluntly, is money. Even if we assume that the nomination for the presidency is a race to be run or a prize to be won, then a sense of fair play would indicate the desirability of neutralizing the factor of financing by personal wealth, wealthy backers and pressure-groups. But if we view the Presidency and Vice Presidency, as I believe they ought to be viewed, as offices which should seek for their incumbents among the ablest, the most dedicated citizens and permit them to be free of personal obligation to any particular groups or individuals within our society, then all the more it seems essential to neutralize the financial factor.

In this connection, it would be helpful if active Presidential nominating campaigns could be limited in time to a period of a month or less. Further, the expenses of bonafide nominees should be borne out of public funds

and all personal expenditures by the nominees or on their behalf by other individuals or by groups should be rigidly curtailed. That this approach to financing campaigns is not only theoretically but actually possible is borne out by the experience of others. The United Kingdom, for example, effectively limits election expenditures and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico provides for the reasonable expenses of bonafide political parties out of the public treasury.

Nor can the cost of financing campaigns out of public funds be regarded as a burden on the public. The public, in the long run, may well pay many times over for the privilege of being relieved of the campaign expenditures which are now borne largely by a small group of heavy contributors and purchasers of \$100.00 a plate dinners. There could be no greater safeguard of the public interest and the public purse than to place public officials under full financial obligation to and in the full financial control of all the people of the United States rather than a few. What applies in connection with the financing of nominating campaigns for the Presidency would apply of course with even greater relevance to actual election-campaigns and, in all candor, to the election of Members of Congress.

The need is to examine this two-sided problem while the experience of the conventions and the coming election-campaign remains fresh in our minds. I would hope, therefore, that the next President would encourage and the next Congress would act through its appropriate Committees to give thorough consideration to ways in which we can equalize the voice of all Americans in the selection of candidates and to equalize the opportunity for all candidates to be considered.